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SUBJECT: GOR SO FAR LOW KEY ON MANAS

REF: MOSCOW 839

Classified By: Acting Political Minister Counselor David Kostelancik for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (SBU) In the wake of the Kyrgyz announcement that the U.S. and Kyrgyzstan had reached a new agreement on the continued use of the Manas airport in support of NATO operations in Afghanistan, official GOR reaction so far has maintained the consistent line that Manas is a matter of bilateral relations between the U.S. and Kyrgyzstan, with Russia playing no role in it. Answering questions during the June 23 press briefing, MFA spokesman Andrey Nesterenko stated that it was "unquestionably the sovereign right of Kyrgyzstan to conclude such an agreement" with the U.S., emphasizing that Russia itself, along with Kyrgyzstan's neighbors, was also rendering transit assistance to NATO for counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan. Similarly, Leonid Moiseyev, Presidential Special Representative for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), told us that while he did not know whether Kyrgyz President Bakiyev raised Manas in his bilateral meeting with President Medvedev during the June 15-16 Yekaterinburg SCO summit, SCO members did not discuss this issue during the summit sessions and considered it purely a bilateral issue between Kyrgyzstan and the U.S.

¶2. (C) In the coming days, we might see the GOR sticking to this public position, while developing a nuanced stance on the distinction between the transit center in the new U.S.-Kyrgyz agreement and an air base. Nesterenko alluded to this already in his press briefing, reminding reporters that Bishkek had stated in February that its decision with regard to the closure of the U.S. base at Manas was final and not subject to reconsideration. This, in Nesterenko's words, is something worth keeping in mind.

¶3. (SBU) According to Gennadiy Chufrin, well-informed scholar at the Institute of World Economics and International Relations, Moscow would not object to the use of Central Asian facilities for transportation and logistic support of NATO's Afghanistan operations, as long as it did not represent the reemergence of U.S. military bases in the region. Bases whose air operations and security were controlled by the U.S. rather than the host country would be a serious challenge to Russian interests, and would present grave concerns to China as well, he told us. Expert commentaries in the press have also picked up on the distinction, with political scientist Sergey Mikheyev writing June 24 that "the status of a military base seriously differs from that of a civilian transit center."

¶4. (C) However, we might also receive blowback in the near future from some GOR officials for surprising Moscow with the new agreement. As Deputy Foreign Minister Grigoriy Karasin

previously stated to us, while the GOR considered it a matter of course that the U.S. would talk directly with the Central Asian countries regarding an alternative to a military base at Manas, transparency with Russia on this matter would be important to the GOR (reftel). "We want to know what you are doing. When we discover arrangements post factum, it creates a sense of distrust." Already, anonymous MFA sources have been quoted widely in the Russian press that Bishkek's decision was an "unpleasant surprise," to which Moscow would provide an "adequate response."

15. (C) Comment: The SCO adopted a common understanding in 2005 that member states would take steps to end the presence of U.S. military bases in the region. Whether by design or by improvised nimble footwork, Bishkek appears to have managed to fulfill its end of the bargain to the SCO and to Moscow, while at the same time maintaining its cooperative role with the U.S. regarding Afghanistan and reaping additional financial benefits from it. With its own negotiations with the U.S. on the transit of lethal material near completion, the GOR can hardly adopt a hostile stance on the U.S.-Kyrgyz agreement. That, and reiteration of USG intentions to pursue a cooperative relationship with Russia during the upcoming Presidential summit may help assuage possible hurt feelings in some quarters of the GOR. End Comment
BEYRLE